

OP-EDS

# THE ZIEGFELD'S LAST PICTURE SHOW

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The Ziegfeld, New York City's most elaborate movie theater, shut its doors after final screenings of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* on January 28. Its sumptuous decor in the tradition of early-1900s movie palaces made it the go-to place for premieres. A throwback even when it opened in 1969, let alone in an on-demand era, is its last bow a sign that the culture of moviegoing as a special event belongs just as much in the past?

More foreboding is the site's planned transformation into a ballroom for "society galas and corporate events" ([The New York Post](#), January 20). As a luxury experience available to a mass audience and iconic beyond its immediate function as a commercial space, it was perhaps rivaled in New York only by toy store FAO Schwarz (which folded last year). The venue that had offered a royal occasion for the price of a movie ticket will be reserved exclusively for the bona fide economic elite. Two years into Bill de Blasio's mayoralty, the rich and poor "two cities" identified by his campaign are growing even farther apart.

Florenz Ziegfeld was skilled at foreseeing popular taste, discovering such talent as W.C. Fields, Will Rogers and Barbara Stanwyck for his stage shows. Yet his namesake, absorbed by the Clearview and Bow Tie chains, served up for its distinctive single screen the same movies — and the same popcorn — as the multiplexes. Meanwhile, innovative upstarts like Alamo Drafthouse have thrived with upscale menus and eclectic programming. And the popularity of their revival and special screenings demonstrates consumer demand for "going to the movies" as a communal activity, not only for convenience of access above all. Institutions of film culture are vanishing from the city of Woody Allen and Martin Scorsese not because they are unwanted, but because they are unaffordable. The Ziegfeld's midtown Manhattan is the epicenter of a real estate bubble that has driven its clientele farther and farther away. The entrepreneurial spirit can tackle the economic gap as well.

A closer look at de Blasio's programs for making the city affordable confirms what Samuel Stein ("[De Blasio's Doomed Housing Plan](#)," *Jacobin*, Fall 2014) observes: They operate "without fundamentally challenging the dynamics between developers and communities, landlords and tenants, or housing and the market." De Blasio's modus operandi is cutting deals with developers, offering preferential regulations and outright subsidies in exchange for construction including some rent-controlled units.

Politicians in any city can be more effective by getting out of the way. Instead of granting preferential exemption from zoning restrictions in ways friendly to big business (and which accelerate gentrification), said restrictions could be repealed altogether, starting with those most burdensome to the neediest. Shifting tax revenue onto land value would make productive use of real estate more gainful than withholding. And corporate welfare handouts could be cut from nine and ten figures to zero.

The curtain has closed on the Ziegfeld, but the show can go on elsewhere — and tickets don't have to cost a king's ransom.

*New Yorker Joel Schlosberg is a contributing editor at The William Lloyd Garrison Center for Libertarian Advocacy Journalism ([thegarrisoncenter.org](http://thegarrisoncenter.org)).*

## **PUBLICATION/CITATION HISTORY**

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- “The Ziegfeld’s Last Picture Show,” by Joel Schlosberg, Woonsocket, Rhode Island *Call* [web and print editions], 01/31/16